

TECHNOLOGY

Jonesboro firm builds high-tech business

By Paul Holmes
For NEA Business Today

Though the Silicon Valley has a bit of a head start on rest of the country, Michael Guerriero believes knowledge workers in Northeast Arkansas are every bit as capable as those in Northern California.

"There is no reason Jonesboro can't be a technology center," Guerriero, who has headed CUSI since July of 2002, told Northeast Arkansas Business Today.

Arkansas State University "is putting out some great kids, great graduates" who are ready to work in knowledge-based jobs, Guerriero said. Couple with that the high quality of life and reasonable housing costs found here, he said, and Jonesboro has the opportunity to attract and keep high-tech jobs, Guerriero said.

CUSI has produced technology solutions for managing the operations of utilities for the last 20 years. Today more than 850 water, sewer, gas, electric, waste management and submetering companies use CUSI's Windows, SQL, and .net applications for their utility billing, accounting, and operational needs.

Guerriero calls CUSI's latest product, Utility Management Solution.net, the most advanced customer information system/billing application on the market today.

The company took its time in developing it, he said, using the latest software development disciplines and documentation standards to endure that UMS.net was "an incredibly strong product ... that works, and works well."

Utilities who use the system are finding that it exposes the customers

"to their own data," Guerriero, said. Previously, he said, the customer information data was "captive," and only the utility could see it. But now, he said customers can manage their accounts in terms of making payments online, authorizing recurring payments through a credit card or bank draft, or ask for an e-bill rather than a mailed paper bill, saving the customer and utility time and money.

For example, he said, water leak detection software can send a trouble report electronically to the utility. The utility can determine which truck and technician are closest to the problem through the use of GIS, or Geographic Information System, technology, and send a repair order to the handheld computer device of the closest technician.

"What we find exciting at CUSI is that we're on the forefront of this

business," Guerriero said.

There are, he said some "unique challenges" in operating such a business in Jonesboro. "People are very surprised there's an advanced technology company on the cutting edge in Northeast Arkansas. That's unique but it doesn't take much to get over that stigma," Guerriero said. Customers realize quickly "We've got some very bright, very sharp, talented people who are from here." That complement of talented employees includes not just software developers but the 24/7 customer support staff, he noted.

"I'd welcome more technology companies to Jonesboro," Guerriero said, adding that he would welcome expansion of ASU's technology programs to turn out more graduates ready for knowledge jobs. "Our challenge is finding bright tech people who want to be a part of this."